love, is not a war of attrition by rumiberri

It's a promise around your finger, that even if neither of us make it, we'll still see each other again, one day. [AU] [No Magic] [War]

Anime » Puella Magi Madoka Magica/□□□□□□□★□□□ Rated: T, English, [Madoka K., Homura A.] Kyoko S., Mami T., Words: 9k+, Favs: 10, Follows: 9, Published: Jun 2

7

There's a box on the mantel, that she makes sure to pass by every time she leaves the apartment.

It's a plain thing, unpainted, with wooden panels, and big enough to lay across both her palms. On the top face, there's a small slot scratched into the surface, and every time she passes, she deposits 100 yen inside.

It's morning now, and they have just finished their meager breakfast.

She helps Madoka clear the table, and joins her at the sink to help with the dishes. They're silent, working in tandem, with a certain familiarity that speaks of years being together.

It hasn't been that long though, it just feels like it.

"Do you have to go to the base today, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, hands moving as she pushes light soap suds around.

"Yes." Her own hands are occupied as she dunks the washed plates into a half filled bin. Running water is limited, growing ever scarcer these days. She knows it's only a matter of time, until nothing spills from the faucets. "There's a new shipment of supplies they want me to work on."

Madoka hums, and continues her task.

"What about you, Madoka? If I recall, you took two extra shifts last week."

Madoka nods. "Yeah."

She hears it in her tone. "But?"

"But, they want me in for at least half a shift today."

"Sounds about right."

They're both resigned to their assignments.

The dishes are finished, and set to dry.

And now, there's ten minutes until she needs to leave.

She'll be late, but no one ever expects her to be on time anymore.

It's her own form of defiance, and though they have threatened incarceration, they can't afford to spare her.

Madoka places a kiss to her lips, and gives her a smile that no longer quite reaches her eyes. "Stay safe, Homura-chan."

She nods, her own hands unwilling to let go of Madoka's. "You too, Madoka."

Unsaid words exchanged through their eyes. Madoka smiles once more as she lifts Homura's hand, lips pressing onto her fingertips. "I will see you later?"

She nods once more. "Next week, hopefully."

"Stay safe," Madoka whispers again.

She nods.

There's a click as the door closes, and she's by herself now, in the small apartment they call home.

She remains seated, letting her internal clock count as each second ticks by, thoughts everywhere else but here. Right when the ten minute mark hits, she heavily rises to her feet.

The chair is pushed back into place under the kitchen table, and she casts a look around.

Another sight, burned into her mind: an empty room, filled with fleeting memories and ghosts of past.

She sighs, and decides she needs to move. Once she reaches the box on the mantel, her fingers slip in another 100 yen coin.

There's the soft clink as metal hits metal, and she remains there, standing. Waiting.

Her hand lingers against the box.

"...I'm sorry," she says. "Just... a little longer. I promise."

Her fingers drag against the smooth surface, and suddenly there's the sound of her heavy boots as they carry her across the floor.

She needs to get to the base.

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She finds faces she recognizes here.

But more often than not, those she recognizes, are slowly disappearing.

The entrance to the large building is a simple door that slides open whenever someone is close enough to the sensor; a remnant of technology from the past.

The first thing that greets her, is a projection screen that extends from floor to ceiling. Her eyes skim the contents, and there are a few names that pop out, just like always.

She notes the dates, and realizes it'll be another one she'll miss.

It doesn't matter though. They aren't real funerals anyways.

Just piles of bodies, stacked, unmarked, and set to burn as the wind carries ash and smoke into the atmosphere.

She continues on, towards the testing grounds.

She's beyond late now, but she doesn't really care.

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When she reaches the designated plot of land, she finds the other troops are lined up, and the one in charge looking less amused.

No doubt due to her absence.

There are no hesitations in her steps as she walks down the stairs to join them.

The few guards she passes, salute, but she ignores them, just like she ignores the burning gaze directed straight at her.

A familiar shade of red catches her eye, and she turns just to see eyebrows waggle in her direction.

It's not enough to break her stride, and she continues towards the front, to where the Colonel stands.

She stops in front of him, and he stares her down.

She knows it bothers him, that she's that much shorter than him.

He outranks her, but her job is that much more important than his.

"You are late." His voice booms loudly in their ears.

She nods, but makes no effort to apologize.

He knows better than to wait for one, and merely grabs her by the shoulder, and shoves her towards the piles of metal in the back.

"Get to work. We need to send a new shipment out by today."

She nods, and signals for someone in the group to join her.

"Glad to see you haven't lost your edge," Kyouko grins as she sidles up besides her.

She shrugs. "I didn't know you came back."

Months since she has last seen her, and Kyouko is now notably taller than her. Messy red locks tied into a high ponytail, uniform now littered with more patchwork.

In a sense, she still seems the same.

Kyouko yawns, and despite it being against protocol, a packet of smokes is drawn out from her jacket pocket.

"You better not light that," Homura tells her dryly. "Didn't you quit? Miki-san threatened mutiny against you."

A cigarette is placed to her lips, though it remains unlit. "Yeah. I was clean for a bit. Didn't last long."

"Mm." Homura starts gathering pieces, handing them off to Kyouko when she's satisfied with what she sees.

It's clockwork between them, and after an hour with idle chitchat, there are piles of separated parts.

She gestures for a few more soldiers to join them. Once they're close enough, she points to a few stacks, and they gather those and start moving them to another section.

"Ain't it weird?" Kyouko asks, and Homura frowns when she smells the smoke.

"There's gunpowder very close by. Put that out," she tells her.

Kyouko takes one last drag, and without hesitation, her calloused fingers pinch the end of the cigarette, snuffing out the burning ash.

"Ain't it weird?" she repeats.

Attention diverted as she starts assembling pieces, Homura doesn't bother looking at her. "Hm?"

"Just. Everything in general." Kyouko gestures around them. "Like, how did it turn out like this? How did we become like this?" She reaches over and tugs on Homura's over sized army jacket. "We're soldiers, Homura. You were this adorable, little, shy girl back then. Thick glasses, with an endearing stutter. And now look at you." She lets go, and Homura finally straightens, and turns to her.

"War happened, Kyouko."

Kyouko nods, and it's out of habit that she takes a long draw out of her unlit cigarette. "You know what I think? I think, war is just an excuse," her voice is dark, seeped with bitterness. "You know what I see, when I'm out on the field? *People* happened. That's what happened. The things they tell us we're fighting for—all lies."

Homura doesn't reply, her own hands continuing her task of assembling.

"I was assigned to the West," Kyouko tells her. "That place, has to be the worst off, so far. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd make it back."

Homura nods in agreement; she has heard stories.

"But you know what I saw there? Running water. Fresh food. Milk and eggs. It was like, a damn super market over there. You remember those things, Homura?"

Homura shrugs. "Vaguely."

"...What are we even fighting for?" Kyouko tilts her head up, and the red sky that hangs above has her closing eyes.

It hasn't been that long, and she can still remember the clear blue that should be there instead.

"Nothing," Homura replies.

Crimson eyes open. "...There's been talk."

"Of?"

"...They're assembling a team. To try and overthrow the government. To stop the war."

Homura finally looks at her. "They control all the major borders. The trade routes. The supplies. It'll be impossible."

Kyouko leans in close, fangs glinting. "That's what makes it more fun."

Homura turns away. "...I still have things I need to do here."

Kyouko doesn't move. "...Even if Madoka is joining?"

Her head whips around, and lavender narrows. "Madoka...? She... never said anything."

Kyouko nods. "Madoka. She's... one of the ones that proposed the idea."

"...What?"

Kyouko reaches out, and pats her on the shoulder. "You're always out on assignment. Before this, you were gone for a month, right?"

"...Yes."

"We're all in this." Kyouko gestures to the soldiers surrounding them. "These kids too. They're a part of it." Kyouko grins. "The guy that just yelled at you."

Homura frowns. "What?"

"Don't act so surprised. No one wants this to continue. I'd say like, two-thirds of the personnel on this base are on our side. Most of us are from the East, you know? Land of love, and peace, and everything."

"Madoka..."

"...She wants you to join, because you want to," Kyouko answers. "Not because of her."

Homura blinks. "I..."

"You said you have things to do here. You think you can put them off, for a bit?"

She thinks to the box on the mantel.

"If we win, you won't need it anymore," Kyouko tells her, voice soft. "None of us will."

She hesitates. She doesn't mind her job right now. She doesn't like it, but, it's simple, and she's more or less out of real danger.

She's not out there, in the front lines.

Kyouko slaps her on the back. "Look. It's fine, alright? No hard feelings. I totally understand."

She glances over, but Kyouko is already walking away, cigarette once more lit as she avoids the barrels of gunpowder.

She's no sooner to reaching her decision by the end of the day.

But by then, Kyouko has disappeared to somewhere else, and then she is whisked to another base, for another assignment.

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What should've been a week gone, turns into two.

And when it ends, she realizes that it was never really her choice, all along.

The base she's at is in shambles, with only a handful of survivors.

They manage to survive on stale crackers and sips of water; when another one dies, it means less rations to be split, and another etching scratched into the wall.

They box themselves up in one of the underground bunkers, and finally, when she's done assembling enough guns out of spare parts, they pry open one of the secret passages that leads to the main courtyard.

It's dusk, and there are no visible enemies in sight.

Two weeks in lock down; no doubt they have already written them off as dead.

This base is one of the least supplied, and had all but collapsed within minutes of the first attack.

She had suspicions of her assignment, of why she was sent here. She understands now, it was a set up.

It doesn't matter though, and she's second in line as they exit the bunker.

The base is on fire when reinforcements finally arrive, days later.

She's sitting atop one of the tanks, watching as the world burns down around her.

She has never really been in the front lines, but it doesn't mean she doesn't know how to fire a gun. She can build them, and she can use them.

Kyouko climbs the ladder, making sure to be extra loud so she notices, and won't end up shooting her.

"Yo, Homura."

A standard greeting.

A familiar greeting.

Homura tilts her head up. "...If you can guarantee we'll win, I'll join you."

Kyouko grins, and pulls out a pack of smokes. "We'll win." She holds out the box. "Want one?"

She eyes it briefly, before she shakes her head. "No, thank you."

"You know what you need, Homura? You need an addiction." Kyouko exhales a puff of smoke. "Smokes, alcohol. Pain. Whatever the hell it is, you need it. You need something that makes things worthwhile."

Homura glances to her. "Smoking makes things worthwhile to you?"

"Yeah," another ring of smoke joins the burning sky. "Like, if I finish this task, I'll get to kick back a cig. Things like that."

"Mm..."

Kyouko takes a seat besides her. "Still..." she whistles. "This your handiwork?"

"...They're burial fires," she replies.

"Huh." Kyouko closes her eyes, and bows her head.

Homura can see her lips are moving. "...Does that work for us, too?"

"...It works for anyone who seeks forgiveness."

Homura finds herself staring at the fires that are still burning bright. "...You think they'd forgive me? They... they have been waiting for a while now..."

Kyouko opens her eyes, and gives her a rare smile. "Yeah, they'd forgive you. You're helping to end the war. They'll understand."

She nods hesitantly.

"And," Kyouko suddenly loops her arm around her thin shoulders. "When this is all over, you won't need that box, alright? Even if I have to help dig it myself. Instead, why don't you think about what you'll buy with the money you saved, when all of this is over. Me... well," Kyouko leans back. "Pocky, sounds pretty damn good."

"Not cigarettes...?"

"Nah. You can't mix business with pleasure, Homura."

"...You're as confusing as ever, Kyouko."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." Kyouko nods to herself. "Anyways, let's say we get outta here? I feel like we're being barbequed alive. Someone's also waiting for you, back there. Hasn't slept a wink since they reported the attack on this base."

She ignores the blatant lies. "...Alright."

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It's early morning when they finally arrive.

Travel by anything with wheels still makes her sick, and she's one of the few that's still up when the vehicle stops.

Kyouko is asleep next to her, and she is none too gentle as she shakes her awake.

She suddenly finds herself in a headlock, an arm pressed painfully against her windpipe.

"K-Kyou—" she gasps out.

Kyouko lets go, and she falls to her knees, one hand against her neck, another on the floor, keeping her body upright.

"Whoops, sorry," Kyouko apologizes, now wide awake. "Reflex, you know?"

She knows there will be a bruise there tomorrow, and resolves to try and hide it from Madoka.

"Anyways," Kyouko leans down and helps her up, "most of them will be inside. Let's go."

She follows her, and once they enter the large conference room, all eyes turn to look.

She ignores all of them, except one.

"Homura-chan!"

Madoka tackles her, and even if she hadn't just gone through a two week campaign with just crackers and water, her normal strength wouldn't have been enough to keep the both of them standing.

She can feel her tears against her neck, and her hand reaches out, awkwardly patting Madoka in comfort.

It takes a few minutes to calm her down, and when Homura takes a seat in one of the many chairs gathered around the long table, she finally notices two more familiar faces in the crowd.

Madoka drops into her lap, and she's acknowledged by blue and blonde with two brief nods.

They're in the middle of a meeting, as indicated by the diagrams and words written on the white board.

She's exhausted however, and after looping her arms around Madoka's waist, she leans her face against those familiar shoulders, and promptly falls asleep.

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There's light peeking through the small window, and she blinks sleepily as her eyes adjust to the brightness. Her vision is blurry, mind hazy, and her eyes close once more.

She feels something wrapped around her, and her curiosity is enough that she opens her eyes to look down.

A familiar head of pink hair, unkempt and messy, more so without those red ribbons holding it in place.

Madoka.

She realizes that they're both out of uniform, half dressed.

Her hand automatically reaches up, and when her fingers grazes cool metal against her neck, she relaxes, ever so slightly.

"Nn... Homura-chan...? Are you awake...?"

"Y—" she coughs, suddenly aware of how parched her throat is.

Madoka shifts, and helps move her into a sitting position. She disappears for a moment, and then there's a cup pressed against her lips.

"Drink, but slowly, okay?"

She does as told, but when the liquid hits her mouth, she's tempted to chug everything down.

Madoka is there, pulling it away before she can do so. "Slowly," she tells her, voice scolding.

She swallows, and her throat feels that much better. "Sorry," she murmurs.

Finished with two cups, she's resting against the pillows, back of her head against the headrest on their shared bed.

Madoka is curled in around her, quiet, though she knows she has many things to say.

Her mind is slowly catching up, and finally, Madoka speaks.

"...I'm sorry. I knew you'd survive..."

She shakes her head, and closes her eyes. "It's fine... I... understand."

And it's true, because she really does.

She feels hands run underneath her shirt—and shivers lightly at the gentle touch.

"You've lost weight," Madoka says, trying to fill the silence with words.

"...Just a little," she replies.

"A little is a lot for you." Madoka's fingers are dancing across her thin ribs, tickling her, and skirting into dangerous territory.

She reaches down, hands stopping Madoka from moving further up. "Crackers aren't exactly filled with nutrients," she tells her, voice dry.

"Mmhmm..." Even without looking, she knows Madoka is pouting.

They remain there for a few minutes, her hands still holding on as Madoka presses herself against her.

"They're thinking of expanding further North," Madoka suddenly murmurs.

She maps out the coordinates in her mind. "Along the river?"

"Mmhmm..."

"Securing the trade route, and taking over a major body of water... The base up there is heavily fortified."

"Mmhmm..."

"...When are they planning on attacking?"

"As soon as possible."

"Hm..."

"But, you need a few days to recover first."

"How considerate..."

Madoka sighs. "Homura-chan..."

She's suddenly sitting up, and knows Madoka is watching her. "I...need to take a shower."

The covers are thrown off, and she moves to stand.

Madoka is there, supporting her as she stumbles. "I'll join you. I need to take one too."

An arm is slipped around her waist, and Madoka is practically carrying most of her weight as they walk to the bathroom.

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Hair now tied into the two braids that Madoka seems to like, she's dressed in a new uniform that bares a different insignia. It's still too big for her though, and hangs over her thin figure; Madoka hadn't been lying when she said she had lost weight.

Her jacket sleeves are rolled up and pinned, as are her pants. She's at least now awake enough to support herself.

She's standing by the entrance, eyes staring at the large projection screen in front.

Eyes—watching as the list of names scrolls down, an endless repeating cycle of casualties declared in the past few weeks.

Arms circle around her waist.

"Sorry. Had a few more things to go over," Madoka murmurs in apology.

She doesn't reply, eyes still stuck on the screen even though she already has the names burned in her mind.

One name in particular stands out from the rest.

"...I'm sorry," Madoka apologizes again, immediately knowing what she's looking at.

She finally glances over. "Let's go."

"Okay." Madoka follows her inside.

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She is assigned her own personal team, something even the government was never willing to give her.

The parts she's given as well, are above the usual standards. They're things she has seen, but never actually touched.

"Nice, huh?" Sayaka tells her.

She hasn't changed much, even though it has been months since she has last seen her.

Her blue hair is now long enough to be tied into a short ponytail, with that familiar pin clipped to the side.

Same uniform, that fits her body a bit better since she's taller, and more filled out.

If she's surprised she's here, she doesn't say anything.

Sayaka is no longer allowed in the front lines, after all.

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Days later, she's resting against a pile of discarded scrap metal when there's a hand against her cheek, lightly slapping her awake.

Her eyes slowly open, and there's a cheerful smile greeting her, though that golden eye says otherwise.

"Rise and shine, Akemi-san."

She starts, and Mami helps pull her to her feet.

"If you're going to sleep, please return back inside. There are plenty of beds. I would rather not have you catching a cold out here."

She rubs at her eyes with her sleeves. "I was just resting for a bit," she murmurs.

"And how long ago was that?"

"Mm..." she pauses, counting off the seconds in her mind. "...two hours ago."

Mami taps her on the head. "We can't afford to have our main engineer catching a cold, Akemi-san. Please take care of your health better."

She yawns, and wipes away those tired tears that form. "Yes, Ma'am."

Another tap. "I am only a year older than you. How many times have I told you that 'Mami' is just fine?"

"Yes, Mami-san," she says, and Mami sighs.

"Well, regardless, I came to check up on you, since you dismissed your team earlier, without permission."

She nods, and proceeds to stretch out the kinks in her shoulders and back. "That was four hours ago."

"We're still getting used to things, and communication is a bit... behind," Mami tells her. "Is there a reason you told them to leave?"

Her arms are raised, and she tilts her head up. "They were getting tired."

Mami watches her. "You do know we're attacking in two days?"

Her arms drop to her side, and she lowers her head to stare at Mami. Like Kyouko, like Sayaka, she hasn't changed much. Her long blonde hair is tied into a ponytail, though hers hangs from the side.

Her face is leaner, she's a bit taller, and like everyone else, a little bit older.

Homura sighs. "They were messing up the parts, disregarding my orders. I had to dismiss them before something broke. Mainly, my patience..."

Mami blinks. "...Do you want a new team?"

"If they're anything like the one you assigned me, no thank you. I can finish the rest myself."

She moves to continue her earlier task, when a hand is placed on her arm.

"...Lunch will be served soon. You should at least eat."

She glances up, and she finds Mami looking at her, this time her lone eye showing a bit of warmth that she hasn't seen in a while.

"...Madoka sent you?"

Mami smiles. "Yes."

She shrugs. "Very well. After you, Mami-san."

"You two compliment each other nicely, Akemi-san," Mami says, voice tinged with amusement. She starts leading the way. "It's... rather unfortunate, that I won't be able to use these new weapons of yours. We pulled out all of the stops for some of those parts..."

She trails after her, eyes casting around, looking anywhere but to the blonde that's walking in front.

"I can still shoot..." Mami murmurs, more to herself than to anyone else. "90% accuracy... it hasn't gone down that much."

She doesn't reply.

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It's a successful raid, and though half the base is destroyed in their attack, the supplies are untouched, and they claim the building as their own.

One secured trade passage later, and two more bases nearby topple over to their growing manpower.

She's tinkering with one of their procured tanks, doing a bit of maintenance, when she hears boots against the metal casing outside.

Her hand is wrapped around the gun holstered to her side, waiting, as a head pokes through the open hatch.

A familiar face is cheekily grinning at her. "Were you expecting an enemy? Too bad! It's Sayaka-chan!"

Her hand does not leave her side.

She watches as Sayaka struggles down the ladder, before she finally lets go of her gun with a sigh.

"Is there something you need, Miki-san?"

"Nah, was just feeling a bit bored. Wanted to see what you're up to."

"Shouldn't you be..." she pauses, "...doing whatever you're supposed to be doing?"

"I'm on break!" Sayaka tells her as she lowers herself into the lone seat. "This is nice. I've always wanted to drive one of these things."

"Mm..." She turns back to her task.

The only sounds for a brief moment, are of her own as she's unscrewing some of the bolts from one of the side panels.

It doesn't last long.

Sayaka peers through the periscope, glancing around at the scenery through the eyes of a tank driver. "Hey, Homura."

"...Yes?"

"You're good at building stuff, right?"

"...Somewhat."

It's an understatement, and they both know this.

"You think..." Sayaka leans back against her seat. "You think, you could build me something...?"

Her hands stop, and she lowers the wrench. "I'm... not sure."

"Just... something simple, you know? It wouldn't need to do much. Just... you know. Just enough."

She glances behind her, and stiffens when she sees Sayaka bowed over in the seat, shoulders trembling ever so slightly.

"I'm useless here," Sayaka whispers. "I can't do anything." Her fist pounds against the steering wheel. "You know what they have me doing...? I'm on kitchen duty. Scooping food with ladles."

Another hard knock into the steering wheel.

"They can give me something else. A pistol. Hell, even a sword. I don't need two hands for that." She laughs. "Stab people one handed. That's perfect, you know?"

"Miki-san..."

"...Sorry. I'll... I'll leave you alone. Sorry," Sayaka tells her as she stands.

Homura watches as she struggles to scale up the ladder.

"Can't, even do this..." she hears her mumble, voice thick with unshed tears.

When Sayaka finally reaches the top, Homura debates whether or not she should give her a boost; she's not quite that strong, but a little bit should help.

A minute passes, and she moves from her spot to the seat, eyes concentrated on the hatch.

Sayaka is still there, unable to pull herself out of the exit.

"Miki-san... do you..."

"Geez, what the hell are you doing?" a familiar voice cuts in as an arm reaches down.

Homura watches as Sayaka is dragged out, blinking when light enters her vision.

A shadow passes, and Kyouko is suddenly there, grinning down at her.

"Sorry for bothering you, Homura. I'll take this idiot some place else."

"..."

She can hear them arguing above, before there's footsteps against metal as they clamor down.

She lowers herself into the seat, staring at the clutch and the numerous switches nearby.

She debates ever so briefly. She has enough free time, and it shouldn't be hard to change a few things around.

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She's rolling a piece of candy in her mouth when hands rope around her waist.

There's only one person who goes out of her way to do this, and she turns as Madoka grins at her.

"Homura-chan. I heard what you did."

She shrugs, but Madoka doesn't let go, and instead pulls her close.

The candy is stolen, and Madoka licks her lips with a smile. She notices it, that Madoka is happier here.

"...That was mine," she tells her.

Madoka lifts her eyebrow, tapping a finger to her lips in challenge. She has never been one for public displays of affection, and merely pulls out another piece from her jacket pockets.

"This one is watermelon," she murmurs as she slowly untwists the wrapper.

"Strawberry is best," Madoka replies. She crunches down on her prize just as Homura pops the new candy into her mouth.

"That was the last one."

"We'll get more, soon." Madoka looks over to something, and she turns to see that it's reaching sunset.

Another raid tomorrow.

"...Homura-chan?"

"Hm?"

"Do you think... what we're doing, is right?"

She turns to look at Madoka. "It doesn't matter."

Madoka closes her eyes. "...It doesn't?"

"Whether we're wrong, or we're right. Madoka, you've heard the saying, haven't you?"

Pink eyes open to stare at her.

She gives her a small smile. "No one wins, in war."

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It's inevitable, that things don't go as planned.

The next mission ends horribly, with half their troops gone.

It's a continuous string of failures, each one worse than the previous.

Their numbers are low enough, that she's placed as backup, manning the radios when this one in particular goes south.

Madoka and her unit have already been evacuated; they have no hope for survivors.

She's minutes away from her own withdrawal, when a very familiar voice cuts in.

"*Hey... Ho...ra... you there...?*"

Her hand flicks the switch. "Miki-san. You are okay. We're withdrawing soon, head back towards the rendezvous point, if you can."

Static, and then her voice once more.

"Nah... T-Things... bad... here... Listen... I'm... use... alright?"

"Miki-san, that's... that's for emergencies only. You will be fine. Please, give me your coordinates. I can send someone out to get you."

She's trying to remember who's still out in the field, when there's feedback, and the crackle as the sound bounces off from the speakers.

"H-Hey...take... of...M-Madoka...a-alright? T-Tell her... sorry... missing... birthday... I... her... a present."

"Miki-san."

"Thanks... ra... Tell... ko... I... her..."

"Miki-san. Miki-san!"

There's no reply, and suddenly there's a loud explosion that rocks the perimeter. She's far enough, that it takes a moment, until the wind rushes towards her, warm and then hot against her exposed skin.

The crackle of the radio.

"All troops! Fall back! I repeat! Fall back!"

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They're left licking their wounds at base camp.

Highest rate of casualties so far, and, as she glances over to the list, maybe one of the most hardest hits yet.

Madoka is sobbing into her shoulder, nonstop, ever since that name first flashed across the screen.

Kyouko, is dealing with it on her own.

Outside, one smoke, one right after the other. As if drowning her lungs will lessen the pain somehow.

Mami is now one of the highest ranking soldiers in the premises, and she has no time to mourn; they need to regroup, and somehow rebuild their dwindling numbers.

And she...

Later, when they return to their apartment, she drops in another 100 yen coin into the box.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, bowing her head.

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Things aren't looking too good. They have the supplies, but not enough manpower.

She proposes an idea to Mami behind Madoka's back.

She knows that Kyouko is currently stuck with thoughts on revenge.

She would be the same too, if it had been Madoka in her place.

It's a simple mission, really. They need to open a path in order to meet with their allies further North.

It's blocked by a large base, heavily fortified, due to its prime location.

Their first attack had gone horribly wrong. Underestimation of their enemies and overestimation of their own numbers.

She has been there a few times, however, and if the floor plans haven't changed since she has last visited, she can sneak in.

It's a take no prisoners proposal, and her main objective would be for it to burn.

Kyouko immediate demands to take part, and she agrees, because there's no way she can carry so many explosives on her own.

Night falls, and she's prepping her gear when Madoka enters the unmarked room.

"...Where are you going?"

Her hands freeze, and it takes her a moment to collect herself, before she turns around.

"Nowhere," she replies, voice steady. "I'm just preparing some supplies, just in case."

Madoka stares at her, those pink eyes narrowed and ever piercing. "You're lying."

She sighs. She has never been a good liar, especially not to Madoka. "It's a mission. I'll be gone for a few days. A week, at most."

"Why are you being sent?"

"...It was my proposal."

Madoka slowly walks over, stopping once she's standing right in front of her. "...Why?"

She turns her head, eyes staring at the wires and half finished bombs on the table. "...It was my fault," she admits quietly.

"Homura-chan..."

She closes her eyes. "If... If I hadn't modified it, she would've... she would've stayed at camp. She wouldn't have turned into another number."

"...She wanted to go. You don't understand, how much she was suffering by standing on the sidelines, unable to do anything."

"She would still be alive today, Madoka."

A hand gently cupping her cheek. "Sayaka-chan... just left a bit earlier than us, that's all. It, doesn't mean we won't see her again."

"...I don't want to make anymore, Madoka," she sobs. "It doesn't matter that I'm not the one out there, firing those weapons. I'm the one that made them. If... If I didn't exist, maybe so many more people would be alive today."

Madoka gathers her in her arms, holding her close. "If it's not you, Homura-chan, they'd find someone else to do their dirty work. Even now, there's more people like you, out there, building even more dangerous things. But you're here, helping us. Where would we be, without you?"

"I don't know," she chokes out, hands grasping Madoka desperately. "Why can't it end? Why can't it be over?"

"Shh," Madoka hugs her tightly. "That's what we're fighting for, Homura-chan. We're fighting, so that it can end. So that everything will be over."

Madoka slowly rocks her back and forth, only stopping once her cries slowly die down.

"...Who's going with you?" she asks softly.

She sniffles. "...Kyouko."

Madoka smiles. "Kyouko-chan? Good. That's good. Then I don't have anything to worry about."

"...Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"If..." Homura straightens up, hands reaching for the metal around her neck. "If, we don't make it, c-can you—"

Madoka's hands are surrounding hers, gripping them tightly. "N-No... Don't make me, Homura-chan. You need to come back."

She struggles to pull her hands away. "Madoka. Please—"

"No! You're going to come back, and you're going to do that yourself! You can't j-just leave me, Homura-chan..."

"M-Madommmf—"

She stumbles, and suddenly finds her back pressed against the wall. Madoka is there, desperate and unwilling to let her go.

Madoka finally pulls away, hands shaking as they're placed against her collar bone.

"Homura-chan... please... don't leave me. N-Not like Sayaka-chan. Not like everyone else. *Please. Please,"* she begs, head bowed as tears run down her face.

"M-Madoka..."

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They set off when dawn breaks. The first day is by car, until they reach a drop off point once they're three quarters there, and the rest is traveled on foot.

Kyouko carries the heavier load, though her own backpack is filled with just as many items.

They need to take numerous breaks due to her struggling health, and Kyouko constantly jokes that she should just carry her, instead.

It doesn't help that they're traveling off the main road to avoid being spotted by patrols.

Finally, they're close enough to set up their own small camp, and she goes over the plans with Kyouko once more.

Over the course of two days, they'll navigate through the base, planting small bombs all around.

The first thing she needs to make sure though, is that the floor plans haven't changed.

They sneak inside once it's midnight; she remembers this is when the guards switch shifts.

They're walking in blind, yet she still manages to lead Kyouko around the perimeter without even use of a flashlight.

Once they settle back into camp, Kyouko shakes her head.

"Damn, that was pretty cool, but pretty freaky. I always kind of doubted what they said about you. Photographic memory, right?"

She's crawling into her sleeping bag, eyes half shut from fatigue.

"It's a double edged sword," she murmurs as she makes herself comfortable. "Whatever I see, I remember forever."

Kyouko's hitting her packet of smokes against her hand when she pauses as she realizes what Homura means.

"...Yeah?"

"Mmhmm." She closes her eyes.

"...Everything?"

"In vivid detail."

"Does it go away?"

"Never."

Kyouko taps her smokes, and finally one cigarette slips out from the small opening. "Remember what I said, Homura?"

"You'll have to be more specific..."

"How you need an addiction?"

"Mmhmm..."

"You need something that'll make you forget. When we return to base, we'll split some sake between us, and let your mind go blank for once."

She pulls up the covers. "We are underage, Kyouko."

"We're old enough to die, Homura. I think we're old enough to drink."

"Maybe... maybe when everything is over. Right now though... I can't afford to forget."

Kyouko places the cigarette to her mouth, letting it hang from her lips. "You and Madoka. You two should totally drink. Get you nice and relaxed. You two... how far are you in your relationship, anyways?"

Homura turns away from her and pulls the blankets completely over her head. "Goodnight, Kyouko."

"Knowing you, you haven't gotten very far." A flicker of her lighter, and a puff of smoke inhaled into her lungs. She holds it in, letting it seep, before she expels out a controlled ring of smoke.

Homura ignores her, holding the blankets around her tighter.

"We thought it was kinda cute, when you two got together. Me, Sayaka, and Mami, that is." Another long drag. "So many relationships happen on base..." She tilts her head up, watching as the purple coloured sun slowly starts rising. "Hell, me and Sayaka. We had a thing, kind of, you know? I could never tell... one day she'd hate me.. The next, she'd be trying to tear off my clothes. Things were kind of bad, though, after... you know. Before... before... damnit."

Homura pulls the blankets off, and turns to face her.

She finds Kyouko slumped over, cigarette dangling from her fingertips as one hand covers her eyes.

"She... wasn't supposed to die. If I had been there, I could've... I could've done something. Saved her. I don't know."

Homura sits up, but remains in place as she has no idea what to do. "...I'm sorry."

A finger points at her, and suddenly Kyouko is glaring. "I already know what you're thinking—and let me tell you right now, it's not your fault. Not yours, or mine, or hers. You understand who's the real killer here, don't you, Homura?"

She blinks. "...War?"

Kyouko nods, a puff of smoke joining the tepid air. "Yeah," she grunts out. "War. This goddamn war. Homura."

"...Yes?"

"We're gonna end it. And then, we're gonna celebrate. Pocky, alcohol. Whatever the hell else you want."

She closes her eyes. "...Alright."

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Though her profile has her listed as a weapon specialist, her expertise really lies in explosives.

It's easy enough, slipping in and out of base while planting bombs; Kyouko seems to be enjoying it, at least.

Not to mention, the enemy is still recovering from the kamikaze attack from Sayaka's sacrifice.

"She's here, helping us," Kyouko had said when Homura had told her the alarm system was no longer functioning. "She's here."

Homura had remained quiet, looking away from Kyouko and her shining eyes.

Finally, it's night, and most of the base is sleeping.

The loads on their backs are much, much lighter, and they clear their temporary camp, erasing all traces of their impromptu set up.

They're standing on the main road, far enough that the backlash from the explosion won't affect them, close enough that they'll see the flames.

Kyouko holds out a fist, and Homura tilts her head.

"You do this," Kyouko tells her, grabbing Homura's hand. She crumples her fingers into a sloppy fist, before she bumps their hands together.

Homura blinks.

Kyouko suddenly throws her head back, hands cupped around her mouth. "Sayaka! This is for you!"

Homura casts one last look towards the discoloured sky. "I'm sorry," she says softly, right before she flips the switch.

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They share a duffel between them.

The bag isn't even half filled, but finally, she lifts the box from the mantel, and slips it inside.

Madoka gives her a smile, and links their hands together.

One last look, at home, before Madoka leads them towards the exit.

The war is continuing, and they're moving to a larger base up North.

Better defense, better trade routes.

Better.

/

Lately, she notices how her eyes have started to blur. They remind her of her days with glasses; the doctors had warned her that this would happen, sooner or later.

Madoka issues the vision test, and soon, there's a familiar pair of thick glasses resting on her face. Her vision isn't as bad as it used to be, but it's slowly dropping towards it.

It annoys her how they slip sometimes when she's working, and how she needs to find them when she wakes up.

Madoka likes them though, and sometimes, when their shifts coincide, she ties her hair in those familiar braids.

Mami smiles whenever she sees her.

"Guess we're both at a disadvantage, Akemi-san," Mami tells her with a wink.

"Mm..."

She doesn't like the tone in Mami's voice, but she knows it's true.

She fastens a strap for them, wearing it around her neck so that she won't lose them.

Kyouko laughs at her when she returns from her mission. "You look like such a little geek, Homura. It's good. I like it."

She sighs, but there's no time, no budget, and no expertise on base for anymore vision corrections.

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Their numbers are growing steadily as more and more deserters join their side.

It's three months until the new year, and no one wants the war to continue past.

The Northern camp, is far different than the one that they had come from.

For one thing, there are families here.

Children, and real adults.

She notices how Madoka watches them sometimes, and how the metal around her own neck burns when she sees them.

Her box is half filled now, and sometimes, she takes walks outside. The environment here, is better, than back at home.

It's not as dry, and there are some plants growing. Not to mention, the large body of water that glistens no matter what time of day it is, sets her mind at ease for some reason.

They would like it here, she decides. Those few short hours, when she's supposed to be sleeping, she usually finds herself outside. She's slowly clearing a small plot of land for them, right by the water.

Madoka notices, and a few days later, that small section is considered off limits to anyone, but her.

/

She's teaching a few recruits how to build the simpler guns, and so far, only one of them seems promising to at least take her place, should anything happen.

Her glasses have been replaced by goggles when she's working, and at least she doesn't have to worry about them slipping off.

Most of the pieces sent to her are damaged these days, and there are more modifications to the weapons that leave her workshop than ever before.

Since there are more higher ranking officers here, sometimes Mami joins her, happily chirping away as she teaches her how to assemble pieces together.

She knows she's missing it—the feel of metal in her hands. She sends in a request, and Mami is usually one of the few testing out the new shipment before they're sent to the front lines.

How the war is going, and how the other bases are, are suddenly a mystery to her.

She's too important to be moved, and she's on permanent assignment here. Madoka doesn't mind, as she's also permanently assigned here.

The only way she knows that Kyouko is still alive, is by the screen located in one of the bigger conference rooms on base.

She always checks it whenever there's a chance, and so far, she hasn't seen that familiar name.

She hopes it remains that way.

\

She's kneeling on the floor, metal pressed against her temple.

Her face remains blank, ever passive, because those hands holding that gun are not steady.

The owner is a child, maybe a year or two younger than her; she doesn't know. Each day that passes, feels like another year.

He's trembling, and there's tears in his eyes.

A victim of war, like she is. Just like everyone else.

"If-If," he chokes out, "if you weren't here, if you weren't m-making all these things—they would still be alive today!"

The gun slips, and he quickly pulls it back into place.

She stares at him. They're alone, her team is resting as she puts in extra hours for another shipment to be sent out soon.

"...Will killing me bring them back?" she asks, voice soft.

He responds by slamming a fist into her head.

It's a mere graze, and her goggles cushion most of the impact.

"If it's not me making them, it'll be someone else."

She knows this very, very well.

"You're angry, right? Angry, that your parents are gone."

In one fluid motion, she's grabbing the gun and his finger presses on the trigger a second too late.

A shot into the metal floor, and suddenly she has his shirt front bunched in her hands, his face close to hers.

"The gun here," she kicks the metal pistol away when he glances down, "it doesn't care that I made it. It doesn't care who you are, who anyone is. Just like war."

She shoves him away and he tumbles into the ground.

He reminds her of herself, so long ago.

"...I don't mind if you kill me," she tells him. "But, not yet. I can't die yet. There's too many things I need to do."

He stares at her, and she knows he's trying to calculate his chances of reaching the gun on the floor before she does.

"...What's your name?"

He starts at the unexpected question. "W-What?"

"Your name."

He scowls. "Why should I tell you?"

"You have no reason to." She pulls out the gun from her holster, the click as she switches off the safety has him stiffening.

"W-What are you going to do to me?"

She points the gun towards him, finger hovering over the trigger.

He's frozen in place, and she fires.

He's sobbing hysterically when Kyouko and Madoka rush inside, guards following after them as they respond to Homura's transmission.

She has her back against the wall, eyes closed. When Madoka approaches her, the haunted lavender that opens remind her of the girl she had met years ago.

Just as they're dragging him outside, Homura turns to him. "Remember what I told you."

Kyouko glances over, and Madoka shakes her head.

They're left alone, and Madoka gathers her in her arms.

"Homura-chan..."

/

She's asleep, curled around Madoka when the door to their room slams open.

The light switches on, and she's pulled up by rough hands.

"Akemi-san! Akemi-san, wake up!"

"W-What?" she mumbles.

It has only been two hours since she had collapsed onto her bed, and Madoka steps in for her.

"What's wrong, Mami-san? Can't this wait until morning? Homura-chan just fell asleep!"

Her glasses are slipped into place, but her eyes remained closed.

There's a giant sheet of paper waved around. "They found blue prints! For an aircraft!"

She leans against Madoka, still half asleep. "What...?"

"Airplanes! They're—building them, in the West. One of our allies managed to grab hold of this during one of their raids! Do you understand what this means? We need to get started on our own! Come on, wake up!"

Madoka slaps Mami's hands away. "Homura-chan has been working nonstop these past few weeks. She's going to get sick, with how much work you're forcing on her!"

"Their aircrafts are almost done, Kaname-san! Do you not understand how much of a disadvantage we're at without ones of our own? Imagine an aerial attack on our bases!"

"We have cannons set up—she installed them when we first came here, remember?"

"We need to—"

Something in Madoka snaps. "Homura-chan is not a machine that you can just turn off and on whenever you want!" She shoves Mami out the door. Homura falls back onto the bed when her support is gone. "She will start in the morning! She's scheduled to work," she glances at the clock, "in five more hours. *So get out*!"

The door is slammed shut, and this time, Madoka remembers to enable the second lock.

She shakes her head in frustration. They're spending less and less time together, and all they do is sleep when they're finally alone.

She won't say it, but she's lonely, and the more time Homura spends working, the more she feels like she's drifting away.

It's hitting them hard now, and there seems to be no end in sight.

"...Madoka...?"

Madoka sighs, and runs a hand through her messy hair, before she returns to bed.

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Assembling an aircraft is top priority, and those few apprentices that had worked under her for a few weeks, are now in charge of the weapons.

It's a very slippery slope, and half the time she has to double check their work; most of the time it makes her want to hit her head against the wall.

She's tired, but there's barely enough time to eat, let alone sleep.

"So, you planning anything special?"

Kyouko is helping her today. Why she's not out there, fighting or whatever, is beyond her, but she's just glad there's someone competent on her team this time around.

Homura yawns as a response. She knows what she's referring to.

"Don't think they'll give me any time off." She gestures to the back, where there are two guards stationed. "I can't even go to the bathroom without their permission..."

"Nah, forget them. I'll take care of it. You gotta spend time with your girlfriend, else she's gonna run to someone else one of these days."

"Mm...maybe she should. I'm not s—"

She finds herself on the floor, head now spinning.

Kyouko kneels, and helps her sit up. The guards are running towards them, and she waves them off. "She just got a little bit dizzy, that's all. She needs something to eat."

She easily lifts Homura to her feet, and slips an arm around her waist.

"Sakura-san, she's not allowed to leave the room without—" his partner cringes when Kyouko slams her fist against his face.

She looks to the one remaining guard, eyebrow quirked in challenge.

He salutes, and she nods.

She turns to the others in the room who are frozen in place after she had thrown that first punch at Homura.

"The rest of you idiots, get the hell outta here. I don't know how long your break will be, but, none of you better touch anything here. You're on standby, and will return when I call you in. You got that?"

They all straighten, and salute her.

"Yup. Still got it."

Kyouko drags her to the medical wing, and when she sees Madoka, she grabs her by the back of her shirt and pulls her along.

"K-Kyouko-chan?!"

She finds an empty room, and throws the both of them inside. "Happy birthday. Now, do whatever you want with her, alright? You got two hours, at most. Anything more than that, I can't guarantee."

Kyouko enables the privacy option, and suddenly the door is slammed and locked, and now it's just the two of them, alone.

Homura stares at Madoka. "Uhm..."

Madoka fidgets with her shirt.

They haven't seen each other all week.

Homura sighs, and reaches into her jacket pocket. "Happy birthday, Madoka."

Madoka looks up as Homura holds out a hand. At her encouragement, she holds out her own. Calloused fingers brush against her skin as something cold and metallic is gently placed on top of her palm.

"I didn't... have much time to work on it," Homura explains, eyes suddenly shy. "I-It's temporary. There's a notch, where the jewel should go, but I haven't had a chance to search for one yet... so..."

Madoka takes the metal band between her fingers, smiling at the design etched around it: tulips.

Her favourite flower.

"Homura-chan..."

"I-I'm sorry. I wanted to add more, but, I've been so busy lately, and I—"

She suddenly finds herself on the floor with Madoka on top of her.

"I love it. Thank you."

She blinks. "O-Okay. T-That's good."

"Homura-chan...?"

"H-Hm?"

The look Madoka is giving her is making her nervous, and she tries to move away.

"It's... my birthday, you know...?" Madoka breathes out.

"U-Uh huh..."

"You know, what would make me really happy...?"

She shakes her head as the room suddenly feels way too warm.

Madoka's hands are now trailing down her body.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka smiles. "Two hours... Hm... that's... that's not enough time... but it's better than nothing..."

"M-Madoka...? U-Uhm... w-what—" she squeaks when those hands are now tugging at her jacket buttons. "M-Madoka...?"

Madoka leans in, still smiling.

/

Kyouko cackles loudly, repeatedly hitting her hard enough on the back that she knows there's going to be a bruise there in the morning.

"You're welcome," she says, voice smug.

Homura shakes her head, still too embarrassed to say anything.

In the medical wing, Madoka grins as she stares at the shiny metal band slipped onto her ring finger.

It's not a real proposal, but it's close enoug**h.**